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Environmental factors predict underserved children's physical activity

In 2005, Jeffrey J. Martin, Ph.D., professor of kinesiology, health and sport studies in Wayne State University's College of Education, found that children living in underserved communities are less physically active than their higher-income counterparts. Now, in a follow-up study published in the *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, Martin has found environmental factors that may affect underserved children's physical activity and fitness levels: classmate support, gender and confidence.

"Underserved children, such as minority children living in low-income households, do not engage in enough physical activity either in or out of school and often lack fitness compared to Caucasian children," said Martin.

To find out why, Martin tested social and physical environmental factors at underserved schools.

"Examining the school environment is a particularly important consideration in underserved communities, because often children have limited equipment, and play areas are unsafe or in poor condition," Martin said.

Martin measured social factors, including how much confidence children have in their own abilities, how much confidence they have in seeking support from teachers, how much support they receive from classmates and how conducive to physical activity they perceive their school to be. Participants in the study included African American, Caucasian, Asian American, Arab American, Hispanic American and Bengali middle school children between the ages of 10 and 14.

Confidence in their abilities and classmate support were most predictive of physical activity levels. However, most of the children were neutral about how physically and socially facilitative their school environments were to physical activity, and they did not have particularly strong confidence in their own abilities or in seeking help from teachers.

"Given the importance of peer social support, adult support, personal agency and a supportive environment for physical activity, it is certainly plausible that underserved children's lack of strong beliefs in these areas contributes to their limited physical activity," said Martin.

Confidence in seeking support from teachers was strongly related to physical activity and fitness, and Martin believes teacher support is more critical to underserved children than to children living in communities with higher socioeconomic statuses. "Fifty-seven percent of the underserved children in the state where the study was conducted live with one parent, making it plausible that the influence that teachers of underserved children have is more important relative to the influence they might have on children from two-parent homes," said Martin.

A secondary aim of the study was to determine whether gender played a role in underserved children's physical activity and fitness rates. Boys had higher levels of fitness, participated in more physical activity and reported receiving greater amounts of classmate support than girls did. "These findings suggest that it is important to be cognizant of gender differences in physical activity research," said Martin.

Martin collaborated with Nate McCaughtry,

Ph.D., associate professor of pedagogy, kinesiology and physical education, and physical education program coordinator in WSU's College of Education; Sara Flory, doctoral student in WSU's College of Education; Anne Murphy, Ph.D., associate professor of research in WSU's College of Education; and Kimberlydawn Wisdom, M.D., vice president of Community Health Education and Wellness at Henry Ford Health System and Michigan's first surgeon general.

"We hope our findings add to a body of knowledge that draws attention to the health status of underserved children and ultimately might influence public awareness and policy," said Martin.



About Dr. Jeffrey J. Martin:

Dr. Martin received a B.S. in psychology from Bowling Green State University, a B.S. in education from Brock University, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in exercise and sport psychology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He joined Wayne State University in 1992.

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